

Climax: the parade swings into view and the President is murdered.

What happened next...

by Richard B. Stolley

I first saw the Zapruder film of John Kennedy's assassination early the morning after it happened. Abraham Zapruder himself was at the projector, set up in a little room of his dress factory, Jennifer of Dallas. I was *Life's* Los Angeles Bureau chief, the only reporter among a small group of Secret Service agents who were about to watch a filmed record of their catastrophic failure to protect the President. The mood was somber.

Of the few hundred people who have seen the film since then, some have become almost nauseated, others gasped out loud. The men I was with that morning watched with an agonized sense of powerlessness.

We were not shown the beginning of the film which pictured some children at play, but we did see some frames of three people at the motorcade. One of them, I believe, was an employee of Zapruder. He had exposed this footage in order to make sure his take-up reel was operating correctly. And then we saw the motorcade snaking around Dealey Plaza, Jackie in that pink suit, the armful of roses, the handsome President smiling and waving, and almost as if in one motion bringing both hands up to his neck which a bullet has just pierced, and then frame 313, the shattering instant when the top of his skull is blown away, soundlessly.

Zapruder ran the film again and again as newsmen from A.P., U.P.I. and other magazines showed up.

Like them, I was there to determine if the Zapruder pictures were worth buying. One viewing was enough to banish all doubt.

When the lights were turned on, Zapruder looked ill. He was a round man, rather short and bald, with glasses (reminding me of Harry Golden), and although an obviously shrewd businessman in a cruel industry, he was gentle with us, almost apologetic that it was a middle-aged dressmaker and not one of the world-famous photographers with the Presidential press party who had provided the only filmed account of the President's murder.

I asked Zapruder if he and I could talk. Because I had been the first of the national press to contact him the night before, he agreed to see me first, and alone. My competitors in the room reacted with understandable alarm. "Don't make up your mind," the A.P. man shouted as we disappeared into Zapruder's private office. "Promise me you'll talk to us first. Promise."

The most famous home movie in history almost never got taken at all. Abraham Zapruder forgot his camera the morning of November 22, 1963, and drove back home to get it only after his secretary cajoled him with the argument that the President didn't come through the neighborhood every day.

His first thought was to take pictures from the

window of his factory which was next door to the Texas School Book Depository. But feeling the excitement of the crowd gathering in Dealey Plaza, Zapruder instead walked down to Elm Street and scrambled up onto a concrete abutment, the best vantage point of several he considered.

He thought the gunshot was a backfire, then through the viewfinder saw Kennedy slump and realized he had been wounded. "If I'd had any sense I would have dropped to the ground," he said, "because my first impression was that the shots were coming from behind me." Instead, he froze, screaming, "They killed him, they killed him," and kept his camera trained on the limousine and the bloody chaos inside until it went through the underpass.

When Zapruder returned to his office—"incoherent, in a state of shock," one employee remembers—his secretary called the F.B.I. and told them about the film. They took Zapruder downtown to find a place to have the film developed. Their first thought was a TV station, but Channel 8 could not process that kind of film, thus missing an epic news beat. Early in the evening they went to an Eastman Kodak lab, and before midnight the film had been shown to the authorities, one copy sent off to Washington and another given to Dallas police.

Zapruder kept the original and one print, and the F.B.I., when asked, said they were his to dispose of. If the federal government had not been in such disarray at that moment, someone with authority and a sense of history would probably have asked Zapruder for the original film, and he probably would have relinquished it.

I arrived in Dallas from Los Angeles four hours after the assassination and immediately was told about Zapruder's film by one of *Life's* stringers. She had heard of it from Dallas police reporters. I finally tracked down Zapruder at about midnight and asked to see the film, but he begged off until next morning. He sounded exhausted, but proved nonetheless that his business sense had not deserted him. He assured me he had obtained sworn statements from the men at the color lab that they had not bootlegged any extra prints of the film. Whoever bought the film would have it exclusively.

Inside Zapruder's paper-strewn office, I met his trusted and influential secretary, Lillian Rogers. By happy coincidence, I discovered that she and I had grown up in small Illinois towns not far apart, and the three of us chatted about that while Zapruder took my measure. He was emphatic on two points: he wished he had not taken the film but now realized it could contribute to his family's financial security, and he was determined that it not fall into the hands of shoddy exploiters. Time and again he described what he feared most—the film's being shown in sleazy Times Square movie houses, while men hawked it on the sidewalk—and the revulsion on his face was genuine.

For my part, I had to find out right away whether Zapruder understood the value of his seven seconds of film. I made a little speech about our being anxious to give the pictures respectable display, just as he was, and nonchalantly added that we might go as high as \$15,000. Abe Zapruder smiled. He understood.

The negotiations between us were most cordial. I would mention a figure, saying I didn't think we could go higher. Zapruder would demur, and I would go higher. The wire-service representatives outside telephoned to ask fearfully why we were taking so long,

the secretary brought in the business card of yet another bidder, this one from *The Saturday Evening Post*, and once when I told Zapruder I had to call my New York office for instructions he courteously left the room.

In the end, *Life's* reputation and our assurances that we would not sensationalize the pictures won Zapruder over before he had even talked to any of the other journalists, which of course had been my hope. At his desk, I typed out a crude contract which we both solemnly signed. It called for payment of \$50,000 for print rights only, an amount I'm sure he could have gotten, and possibly more, from one of those anxious men outside. I picked up the original of the film and the one remaining copy and sneaked out a back door of the building. I wanted to be elsewhere when Zapruder faced my distraught rivals. (Years later the A.P. man still seemed angry with me.)

By Saturday afternoon, television and movie representatives were in pursuit of motion-picture rights to the film once it became known that *Life* had bought only print rights. Zapruder, still shaken by the death of a man whom he honestly loved, said he didn't want to think about it until Monday, but they continued to badger him over the weekend.

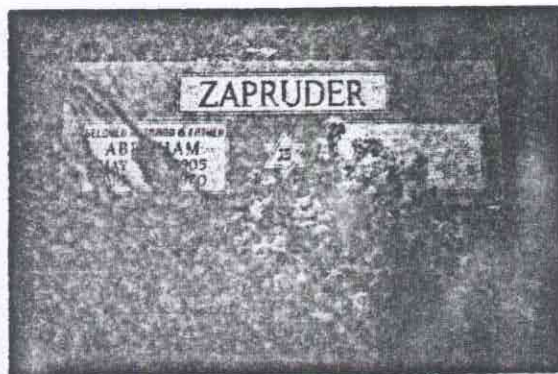
On Monday morning, as thousands of grieving Americans filed by Kennedy's coffin in the Capitol rotunda, the film was shown to Time Inc. executives in New York. *Life's* publisher, the late C.D. Jackson, was so upset by the head-wound sequence that he proposed the company obtain all rights to the film and withhold it from public viewing at least until emotions had calmed. To this day the film has never been shown publicly.

When I called Zapruder again, he seemed relieved that he would not have to negotiate with a stranger, and suggested we meet in the office of his lawyer, Sam Passman. It lacked the comfortable clutter of the dress-factory cubicle, and indeed our dealings were correspondingly more formal, but they went smoothly. As before, a few representatives of other news organizations waited with growing impatience outside as we talked for hours.

I started at \$25,000, we exchanged pleasantries, and I escalated gradually. A few times I excused myself "to check New York" when a new offer from us became necessary. Actually I went to the toilet or into an adjoining office and called the Dallas operator for a time or weather report. I knew precisely how much I had been authorized to spend but thought a little suspense might help us.

Late in the afternoon that John F. Kennedy was buried, we agreed on a

(Continued on page 262)



WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

(Continued from page 135) total of \$150,000 for all rights to the film, to be paid Zapruder in six annual installments of \$25,000. The total payment has been the subject of much uninformed speculation since then; Zapruder asked that we not reveal it at the time. He was extremely sensitive to accusations that he had profited from the young President's death.

Those feelings led his lawyer, Sam Passman, to bring up a subject of great delicacy at the end of our session. He acknowledged anti-Jewish sentiment in Dallas, and said he was afraid that news of Zapruder's sale of the film would intensify it. He proposed that Zapruder donate his first installment to the fund that had been set up for the widow and family of Officer J. D. Tippitt whom Lee Harvey Oswald had shot and killed in his effort to escape.

I remember thinking that whatever fee Zapruder paid the lawyer, Passman had just earned every penny with that inspired suggestion. Zapruder, who earlier had worried aloud to me about the Tippitt family's future, agreed without hesitation, and his donation of \$25,000 two days later earned the public applause it both deserved and was meant to elicit.

Although he had sold the film—and rejected all other offers to talk or write about it—Abe Zapruder was never able to escape it. Wherever he traveled, his name was likely to be recognized, especially in Europe. He was required to testify twice about the assassination, once before the Warren Commission and again in 1969 at the trial of New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw for conspiracy to murder Kennedy.

At the Warren Commission hearing, held only a few months after the President's death, Zapruder broke down describing how he had taken the film. He also participated in a reenactment of the crime in Dealey Plaza. For months he suffered nightmares. The film would unwind in his dream until frame 313, at which point he would jerk awake, heartsick once again.

People who did not believe the Warren Report, even close family friends, never hesitated to burden Abe Zapruder with their theories of the "conspiracy" which killed Kennedy. "Abe couldn't convince them," his wife says. "It amazed him that they couldn't believe that a crackpot, a nut, could do a thing like that." Although he never questioned that Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole assassin, Zapruder privately believed he was shooting at Texas Governor John Connally, not Kennedy.

Zapruder gave his historic camera back to the manufacturer, Bell & Howell, which eventually donated it to the National Archives. He was given a new camera in return, but used it sparingly in the last years of his life. "He found it extremely difficult to use a motion-picture camera," Mrs. Zapruder says. "He was extremely emotional about the whole thing."

He died of cancer in 1970, two years after he'd received his final payment

from *Life*. When the name Abraham Zapruder is mentioned, most people want to know two things—how much he got for the film and whether he kept a copy for himself. The answer to the second question is revealing of the man. He watched the film many times as a sworn witness. *Life* certainly would have let him have a copy of it for his personal records. The original of the film is in a Time Inc. safe and duplicates were rather generously distributed to official government agencies, but there is no print at the Zapruder home in Dallas. He wouldn't have one in the house. ##